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Editor's Notebook: The Fifty-First State?

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EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

The Fifty-First State?

Greetings from Puerto Rico. Your intrepid editor is on assignment in America's Caribbean playground, where the water is deep blue, the warm breezes constant and the countryside lush and fertile. Puerto Rico is also the island where the Stars and Stripes fly proudly and just about every corporate logo can be found from the ever present MacDonalds to Johnson and Johnson to Hooters (which unfortunately sits just in back of the impressive statue of Christopher Columbus). Puerto Rico, after all, is our piece of real estate.

For those of you who are a little foggy on Puerto Rican history, the United States got control of this island as a result of victory over Spain in 1898. Over time we gave the Puerto Rican people citizenship, allowed them free access to the mainland and helped them become the richest Spanish speaking "nation" in Latin America. Puerto Rico, however, is not really a nation, it is a commonwealth or an associated free state, which means that it controls much of its domestic economy but it is not sovereign in terms of foreign and military policy. Moreover, Puerto Rico is heavily dependent on the United States in terms of social welfare programs, capital investment and of course all those Yanquis who fly American Airlines to get a little R and R on the over 300 beaches and the scores of casinos. It is safe to state that without this heavy presence of the United States, Puerto Ricans would not enjoy the

highest per capita income in Latin America and the feel of a modern country.

But being a commonwealth is something akin to being half pregnant. As a commonwealth Puerto Rico is not a state like the other fifty and is not a nation state like its neighbors. For being a commonwealth Puerto Ricans get to use our currency but do not have to pay income taxes; they get to attend Democratic and Republican conventions but they can't vote for the president or have representatives in Congress; and perhaps most importantly Puerto Ricans can fight (and have fought) in our wars but have little if any say in terms of national decision-making. In many respects it's a good deal and a consistent majority of the residents support a continuation of commonwealth status and roundly reject the supporters of independence.



But change is in the tradewinds that race through the palm trees of Puerto Rico. The United States Congress is currently debating the wisdom of sanctioning a national plebiscite that will permit Puerto Ricans to choose whether they want to enter the Union as the fifty-first state. This is a big step not just for the Puerto Ricans who have never been close to getting Congressional approval for a statehood vote. It is also a huge step for the United States since we last took this step over forty years ago when we brought another island into the Union, Hawaii.

Besides upsetting the order and symmetry of the flag with 51 stars, making Puerto Rico a state has some controversial side issues. The House of Representatives is concerned about bringing in a state where 60% of the residents do not speak English; the Senate is concerned about the

future program costs for a state that is currently poorer than Mississippi.

For the Puerto Ricans the debate over statehood centers on whether commonwealth status can continue to bring in the government assistance and the corporate investment. Local officials are convinced that the future of Puerto Rico is as a state where it will have representation in Congress and the White House and more equal footing at the policy-making and budget allocating table. For the average Puerto Rican the issue is taxes. My cabbie, Gilbert, was against statehood for the simple reason that he would have to pay income tax, a pretty powerful argument in my opinion. There is also an inherent Puerto Rican pride that does not want any part of the 50 states, especially since there is widespread belief on the island that Americans see their fellow Caribbean citizens as

not quite on the same economic footing.

There is a pretty decent chance that in December the Puerto Ricans will have their moment of decision when they will cast their vote for or against statehood, or per-

haps more appropriately, for or against commonwealth. If the vote is for statehood, the United States will have the responsibility to respond to a request from its own citizens. It is at this time that the soul searching shifts to Washington where members of Congress will have to decide whether to change the flag, bring in a poor island to the union, accept Spanish as an integral part of Puerto Rican citizenship and give three million people political rights they have been denied for so long. ❧

*Michael Kryzanek is Editor of the
Bridgewater Review*